New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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Theatre Openings

"An Evening with Beatrice Lillie"

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Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"An Evening with Beatrice Lillie"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 3, 1952

'An Evening With Bea Lillie'

By Walter F. Kerr

IF YOU ever wanted to get Beatrice Lillie alone someplace, now's your chance. The illustrious diseuse has taken over the Booth for an intimate, impudent, and thoroughly deranged at-home. In the first half of the program she is assisted—very ably—by Reginald Gardiner. But in the second half she is on her unpredictable own, balancing a fan on her forehead, screeching out the laments of those damned by l'amour, and archly suggesting with every hike of her eyebrows that she has long since compromised us all. It's wonderful.

• • •

With a pianist named Rack to help her keep joyously off pitch, Miss Lillie runs right through all the numbers you'd have requested if you'd been asked to assemble your dream program. She squares her jaw over a helpful brandy, stares her invisible companion coolly in the eye, and proceeds to bare both their souls in "Maude, You're Rotten to the Core." She postures prettily through "There Are Fairies at the Bottom of My Garden." She murders the conventional medley of tried and very tired tunes in that old favorite called "Rhythm," forcing her pianist to rise while she does a few bars of Francis Scott Key. "The Lesson With the Fan" is here, and so is "Paree."

• • •

And there's more to come. The evening is at its brightest when this tilt-nosed scholar of old folklore is poised studiously over an intractable zither, plucking out a dainty, disreputable air. And the passion with which she pursues a rising note to infinity in a sad little song labeled "Not Wanted on the Voyage" provides as delectable a lunatic moment as any honest man can ask for in an entire season.

• • •

The fact that practically everything on tap at the Booth is familiar to Miss Lillie's indefatigable fans does nothing to diminish either the gayety or the spontaniety, of the performance. Whether the star is inadvertently throttling herself with a scarf, swinging a necklace at improbable angles, or destroying the institution of the stage microphone with a few judicious yawps, she is as fresh, as poised, and as slyly poisonous as though she were doing it all for the first time. And the impact out front seemed to me headier than ever.

Reginald Gardiner makes his most emphatic contribution to the proceedings with his long-maned, amiably ferocious conductor of a concert at Carnegie Hall. Though he is competing with a dynamo in Miss Lillie, he is able to hold down the first-act finale with ease. Otherwise he ripples pleasantly through those imitations of wallpaper, angry locomotives, and excessively vain ocean liners for which he is properly famous.

• • •

The program as a whole does take a slight dip somewhere around the middle of the first act. There is a facts-of-life sketch—written some thirty years ago by Herbert Farjeon, if I understood Mr. Gardiner correctly—which, for all that it gives us a glimpse of Miss Lillie as a sniveling lad in an oversize blazer, never quite gets off the ground. And it is directly followed by an impression of a man undergoing anesthesia which Mr. Gardiner, subsequently described as 'slightly macabre' but which seemed to me merely puzzling while it was going on.

• • •

But the first half of the bill has its rewards, too. Miss Lillie, a slim, bitter, lonely figure in the twilight, all but prepared to hurl herself over a bridge into the dark waters below, sings "Wind Round My Heart" with mock-tragic glee. And that backstage sketch in which she descends upon an exhausted actress with a variety of helpful hints still plays beautifully.

"An Evening with Beatrice Lillie" is just what you always expected it might be—perfect fun.

"AN EVENING WITH BEATRICE LILLIE"

Series of sketches directed by Edward Duryea Dowling; settings by Rolf Gerard; technical supervisor Paul C. McGuire; presented by Mr. Dowling at the Booth Theatre, October 2, 1953; featuring: Beatrice Lillie, Reginald Gardiner, Eadie and Rack, Xenia Bank, Florence Bray and John Philip.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 3, 1952

Bea Lillie Gilds New Season

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Beatrice Lillie in a couple of hours last night at the Booth heaved the current theatrical season into a class by itself for the memory books.

She had an adoring audience literally aching with laughter, as she went through a parade of the clowning which is her own unique style of comedy. Some of her present material is new, and some of it is familiar. The mixture is expert. One is only puzzled as to whether the head start of knowing (more or less) what is coming, isn't more fun than the high tension of absolute suspense in new numbers.

Miss Lillie has been smart about the arrangement of this informal revue. Her many, but never too many, appearances are separated by the comical skull duggery of Reginald Gardiner, and in several sketches she is ably supported by Xenia Bank, Florence Bray and John Philip. The music is lightingly laid on by those darlings of the night clubs, Eadie and Rack.

Drawing-Room Asmosphere.

Their two-piano overture somehow declares the atmosphere as that of a private drawing room. It is casual but elegant, the sort of spot where Ethel Barrymore can stroll in on the arm of Cole Porter, looking perfectly in place.

Miss Lillie's first appearance is as the monstrous friend of an actress who calls on the star after a premiere. Such a thunderous hand greeted her that Bea posed a bit, then dashed off to make the entrance over again.

She sang her famed song about "Wind," and shortly indulged in an oddity with Gardiner in which she impersonated a little boy whose father was failing to tell him the facts of life. Saying little, but looking plenty, Miss Lillie here managed to resemble a hungry Burgess Meredith.

Dances in Galoshes.

She struck a Himalayan peak of hilarity in the sketch of the maid who gives her own references by interpolating one of the oddest clogs ever known to hoofing, performed in abbreviated galoshes.

In the second act the star does a series of songs of varying intensity, but invariable artistry. She may do an entire chorus for the sake of the laugh on the final word. Then she will do another in which you barely hear any lyrics because no one ever stops roaring at her antics.

This Lillie is crisp and startlingly handsome and fresh, as well as being magical with funny bones. Her material would have no distinction in the hands of any other performer, and certainly none on paper. Most of the delight she engenders comes from her fearsome ability to ridicule anybody taking himself seriously.

Folksy Yodel.

When a mighty tenor sings "Come Into the Garden, Maud," she simply stares, and cuts him right down to joke size. She gets an audience screaming with a folksy yodel to a zither, and calmly crucifies the average night club vocalist by her antics with a scarf and a microphone.

The show is most becomingly and suitably set by Rolf Gerard.

It has been some seasons now since anyone seriously questioned the fact that Beatrice Lillie is one of the great clowns of all time. It looks as if her only difficulty with the present setup is going to be greed on the part of the customers.

The New York Times

October 3, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Beatrice Lillie is the funniest woman in the world and her program of songs and sketches is admirable and hilarious. "An Evening With Beatrice Lillie," she calls it, adding "with Reginald Gardiner" to observe all the program amenities, and it opened with a series of loud reports at the Booth last evening.

Usually Miss Lillie is interrupted by the musical shows in which she appears. Only Mr. Gardiner interrupts her in this one; and since his sense of comedy is as mad as hers, the interruptions are well taken. Working together they have assembled an evening of comic perfection. You leave Miss Lillie's show full of laughter, and full of admiration also. For she is a brilliant artist and craftsman as well as an uproarious buffoon.

* * *

At least half her material is new to New York. Some of it derives from shows she has done in London, and some of it she has never done before. But the material, whatever its source, is incidental to the comic spirit she puts into it. You know the styles—the rowdy, impudent servant girl or the overbearing lady of fashion, the imposing prima donna with an ornately feathered fan, etc. Miss Lillie has many masquerades, all of them funny sooner or later. "There are Fairies at the Bottom of My Garden" is only a variation on "The Pain of the Wind Around My Heart," and the insolent servant girl who is practicing tap-dancing is only a variation on the obtuse, egotistical society lady who barges into a star's dressing room after a performance.

* * *

Geniuses on the stage are always highly individual, no matter what part they happen to be playing. So it is with Miss Lillie in this show. The slender sharp-featured lady with the polite, embarrassed smile and the dainty manner dominates the material, the stage and the theatre. She radiates satiric comedy even when she is standing still. She sits at a table and looks blank: it is funny. She pauses for a beat in a song: it is funny. It almost seems as though her thoughts were funny. For she is one of the most eloquent actresses in the theatre, and she can set the audience to laughing without saying a word, singing a note or making a gesture.

Although she has the presence of a lady—of a very jaunty lady—she is an enormously funny low comedienne. There is plenty of vulgarity in the stuff she does. She is as anatomical as Willie Heward used to be, and one of the songs she sings is bluer than the scarf she wears in her opening number. But her ribaldries somehow seem to be immaculate. For her style is always demure on the surface; the manner is dry, the gestures sharp and spare, the pace is like quicksilver and the whole thing adds up to the most brilliant comic spirit of our time.

* * *

Mr. Gardiner is up to some of his old tricks and some new ones, all of them being compounded insanity. He imitates wallpaper in sound. He makes a character analysis of the steam locomotive and impersonates marine machinery. By applying a trivial mind to profound mechanical achievements he fantastifies the machine age and devastates the audience. He sings three parts of a song simultaneously, although you may regard that as physically impossible; and he conducts an orchestra with visual appreciation of the sounds that come from the instruments. Mr. Gardiner is a very original mountebank, and first-rate company for a light-headed audience.

Rolf Gerard has provided some pleasantly sketched scenery and an amusing curtain with the austere Lillie profile. Eadie and Rack provide the music from two pianos. But Beatrice Lillie—the only Lady Peel currently on the stage—provides the genius. It has never been more brilliant or hilarious.

DAILY NEWS

October 3, 1952

Beatrice Lillie Returns, Hooray

By JOHN CHAPMAN

For the last three-four years I had a feeling that there was something wrong with this town, for all its magnificence, but it was always a vague feeling. Couldn't pin-point the trouble until last evening at the Booth Theatre—but then I knew. The trouble with the place was no Beatrice Lillie. Now that she has returned, the town is all right again.

Miss Lillie, a great comedienne (and "great" is a word I rarely write in a notice), has come to the Booth with a few helpers to put on a little show called "An Evening With Beatrice Lillie." It isn't any more than a night club floor show—or as much, maybe; for there is nothing in it that could be labeled production or flash. Six dollars top is a lot to pay for so small an offering, but if you are an old friend of Miss Lillie's—and I hope you are—it isn't too much.

Gets Away With Plenty.

The lady is back again, smaller and better than ever. She is a low-down clown, a deadly satirist, the equal of Chaplin as a pantomimist and, all at the same time, the most disarming of people. She is a mistress of the art of being naughty but nice, clumsy yet graceful. She gets away with murder because she is Beatrice Lillie, as she does with a song called "Zither" for which she accompanies herself on a zither.

The principal help in this evening with B. L. is Reginald Gardiner, who has brought back affectionately remembered impersonations of trains, ships, wallpaper and lighthouses. He also has a number new to me, in which, as the maestro of a symphony orchestra, he chops, cuts, wheedles, molds, dangles, whips and seduces every note out of a resounding hodgepodge of music. It is admirable pantomime and very witty.

All Over the Place.

At various times Miss Lillie takes over. She is a friend visiting a star backstage after an exhausting opening performance, and no friend ever was less welcome. She sings an awful ballad about the wind 'round her heart. She is a 14-year-old boy listening while her father, Gardiner, explains the facts of life. She is the world's worst housemaid.

And, for the concluding half of the show, she is Beatrice Lillie, the singer, with a repertory of songs including the one about the fairies at the bottom of the garden, another titled "Three Little Fishies" and a number titled "Rhythm" which is Lillie at her most vulgar and ladylike best.

It really isn't much of a show for the price, and the management probably was wise in announcing an engagement limited to five weeks. But it does afford a chance to see a great comedienne.

New York Post

October 3, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Happy Return of Beatrice Lillie

The wonderful Miss Lillie sings and clowns for an entire evening in her celebrated fashion, with occasional amiable interruptions by Reginald Gardiner, in the entertainment known, with singular accuracy, as "An Evening With Beatrice Lillie," which had its fashionable premiere at the Booth Theater last night. Since the most distinguished and delightful of the lady comics—to pay her something less than an extravagant compliment — is in fine form and a generous mood, there is every justification for the enthusiasm with which her parishioners hailed her.

Actually, there is not much necessity for saying anything more than that Miss Lillie appears in three sketches, two of them among her most famous numbers, in the first half of the show and then, in the second half, takes over and offers a properly extensive repertory of her sly and rakish songs, including, of course, the required "There Are Fairies at the Bottom of Our Garden." This is enough information to let sensible and well-informed citizens know that all is happiness and contentment in the vicinity of the Booth Theater.

The Cult

There is, however, one point which, I think, might well be emphasized once again. Miss Lillie is one of those performers whose fans take on all the proportions of a cult. This means, among other things, that she has merely to assume an expression, make a movement or open her mouth to have her enthusiasts convulsed with ecstatic mirth. In the case of most stars, this is enough to cause cooler heads among the customers to grow a little wary, and it is one of the highest tributes to the art of Beatrice Lillie to say that she justifies even the hysterics of her worshipers.

I think it should also be said for Miss Lillie, in case there is anyone about who has forgotten it, that it isn't paying her enough of a compliment to say that she is the foremost lady clown. She